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"IT SEEMS PLAUSIBLE TO MAINTAIN THAT…": CLUSTERS OF EPISTEMIC STANCE EXPRESSIONS IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC ELF TEXTS

Abstract

Nowadays, when English has firmly established itself as a lingua franca (ELF) in academic settings, it is very important to study the features of texts written by L2 speakers who come from a variety of cultural and L1 backgrounds and who use ELF in their academic communication. The present study focuses on clusters of epistemic stance expressions used in research articles in social sciences and humanities written by L2 speakers. The analysis of twenty papers from the SciELF corpus reveals the patterns in the use of epistemic stance clusters, their distribution in different sections of research articles and the functions the clusters perform at the textual level. The results show that there are many similarities in the distribution and functions of epistemic stance clusters in texts. This suggests that the way L2 speakers, who are professionals in their fields, express epistemic stance seems to be more influenced by the norms of the genre and the discipline than by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Key words

English as a lingua franca, epistemic stance, academic writing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic expressions of stance in academic writing have been the focus of extensive research over the last thirty years. Scholars have approached this phenomenon from an array of research perspectives, using different terms to refer to it: evaluation (Hunston & Thompson, 2000), appraisal (Martin, 2000), hedges and boosters (Hyland, 1998), or evidentiality (Chafe & Nichols, 1986)[1]. From amongst this plethora of terminology, two broad categories of meanings that stance tends to express can be distinguished: the writer's stance toward ideas, i.e. affective (attitudinal), and the writer's stance toward evidence or the status of knowledge, i.e. epistemic stance (hereafter – ES) (Gray & Biber, 2012, 2014). Though all stance categories are involved in constructing the author's argument in academic texts, ES seems to play a very significant role in this process as it allows the author to take a position with respect to knowledge they present thus contributing to the main goal of a research paper – to present new knowledge to the scientific community.

ES expressions have been thoroughly studied within the EAP framework. However, the main purpose of these studies has been to describe the norms in the use of ES expressions in Anglo-American discourse in general (Biber, 2006; Hinkel, 2005; Hyland, 1998) or to uncover discipline-specific variability (e.g. Dahl & Fløttum, 2011; Hyland, 2005). There have also been a number of studies that have compared novice and expert writing (e.g. Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Aull, Bandarage, & Miller, 2017). The main pedagogical implication of the EAP approach to stance has been, as a rule, to show that students need special instruction to master either discipline or genre norms with regard to ES expression.

Another strand of research in ES is the contrastive study of academic texts written by native and non-native speakers of English conducted within Intercultural Rhetoric (Martín-Martín, 2008; Vandenhoek, 2018; Vold, 2006a). In such research, non-native speakers of English are typically viewed from the perspective of deficiency, implying that to be successful in their writing, they need to conform to the Standard English model that more often than not equates to the native speaker model. Such studies, of course, give us some interesting insights into the way speakers of a certain L1 produce texts in English. However, today, when English has firmly established itself as a lingua franca (ELF) in academic communication, and when the number of research papers written by L2 speakers of English has exceeded those produced by native speakers (Hyland, 2016), academic writing in English has become in fact writing in ELF; and ELF, as Mauranen, Hynninen, and Ranta state, is "a language form that arises out of cross-cultural collaboration" (2016: 71). In this respect, comparative studies of native and non-native speakers' writing seem to be losing their critical importance. What

[1] For a review of different approaches to stance see Jaffe (2009).

appears to be of great interest now is the way that multilingual L2 speakers[2] who use ELF in academic communication produce their texts in English, and to explore factors other than L1 that might influence their writing. This idea is recognized by Intercultural Rhetoric scholars: in a paper on the contribution of intercultural rhetoric to studies of academic writing in ELF, McIntosh, Connor, and Gokpinar-Shelton suggest that future research into academic writing should study texts produced by L2 speakers of English from different L1 backgrounds to "paint a clearer picture of how multilingual writers embrace, alter, and/or resist specific conventions" (2017: 18).

This is exactly what academic ELF research is doing as it is concerned with establishing commonalities in the use of English in academic settings irrespective of speakers' L1 backgrounds rather than comparing native and non-native usage of English (Mauranen et al., 2016). ELF scholars believe that in the process of academic communication culture-specific preferences meet with established Anglo-American conventions, which results in what Mauranen, Pérez-Llantada, and Swales call "tension" leading to "hybridization of academic discourse" (2010: 644).

The present study, conducted from the ELF perspective, uses the data from the SciELF corpus (SciELF, 2015), which uniquely allows us to study academic texts written by L2 speakers in their original form before they are changed by any language brokers and to see how ES is expressed in those texts. Initial analysis of the corpus, aimed at identifying the range of ES expressions used in the texts (see Shchemeleva, 2017), has revealed that ES expressions are unevenly distributed in the texts: certain sections of research articles (RAs) contain more ES expressions than others. This observation accords with the conclusions reached elsewhere that ES expressions tend to cluster (Hyland, 2005; Varttala, 2001; Vold, 2006a). The present study focuses on the use of clusters of ES expressions in RAs. The focus on clusters allows us, on the one hand, to identify the most significant parts of the texts in terms of their epistemic positioning and, on the other hand, to concentrate on higher order units of meaning rather than on single ES markers.

The main research questions that the study seeks to address are: (1) which sections of RAs, written by L2 speakers, contain clusters of ES expressions, and (2) what communicative functions do the clusters have at the textual level? The answers to these questions will provide some insights into how L2 speakers express their epistemic positioning in academic texts and will reveal patterns in the use of ES markers in L2 academic texts.

[2] I use the term 'speaker' to refer to all language users, both speakers and writers.

2. EPISTEMIC STANCE EXPRESSIONS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN ACADEMIC TEXTS

Traditionally, ES and the closely related notion of epistemic modality have been defined in terms of the speaker's commitment to the truth value of the proposition (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986). One of the typical definitions made within a formal logic framework is that given by Coates:

> Epistemic modality can be described as concerned with the speaker's assumptions, or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed (Coates, 1987: 112).

Gradually, the notion of 'the truth value of the proposition' was expanded and partially replaced by other concepts. Stubbs (1996) uses the notion 'commitment to proposition'; Kärkkäinen defines ES in terms of the speaker's "commitment to the status of the information that they are providing, most commonly their assessment of its reliability" (Kärkkäinen, 2003: 1). Marín-Arrese, in addition to the speaker's positioning with respect to knowledge, includes in her definition of ES their "commitment to the validity of the information" (Marín-Arrese, 2013: 414), thus treating ES as a category covering two types of meanings: epistemic and evidential.

Though scholars take different positions on the relations between the categories of epistemic modality and evidentiality (for discussion of these positions see e.g. Pietrandrea, 2005), in the present paper ES is viewed, following Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), as a broad term including both epistemic and evidential meanings. According to these authors, ES markers express a writer's "certainty (or doubt), actuality, precision or limitation", or indicate "the source of knowledge or the perspective from which the information is given" (Biber et al., 1999: 972). This approach to ES seems very helpful in establishing the range of linguistic means used to express ES in the data because a meaning-based definition allows us to treat ES expressions as an open category that may include different linguistic forms used for the same meaning.

The description of linguistic expressions used in texts to convey ES can inform our understanding of how writers exploit linguistic resources to express certain meanings. However, it is very important to identify the functions of ES expression at the textual level. Various theoretical approaches have been taken in researching the communicative functions of ES expressions in academic texts. In his study on hedges, Hyland argues that "[h]edges are employed to achieve a single primary objective: to overcome the inherent negatability of statements and gain the reader's acceptance of a knowledge claim" (Hyland, 1998: ix). In the context of academic texts, hedges are often viewed as a means of expressing tentativeness, cautiousness, mitigation, politeness, and a humble attitude (see e.g. Salager-Meyer,

1994; Vold, 2006a). According to Vold, realizing the "need to appear polite, modest and cautious and the desire to anticipate potential criticism" (Vold, 2006a: 238), the writers use epistemic modality markers to put forward hypotheses and present conclusions in a cautious manner; to suggest possible explanations; to signal the limitations of the study; to mitigate criticism and express caution when interpreting other researchers' ideas (Vold, 2006b). Lancaster (2016) shows that one of the functions of ES is to create critical distance regarding other research. In a diachronic study on academic stance expressions Hyland and Jiang state that the main function of hedges and boosters is to "either invest statements with the confidence of factual reliability or withhold complete commitment to imply that a claim is based on the author's plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge" (Hyland & Jiang, 2016: 259).

Any discussion of the communicative functions of text-based ES expressions must take account of the interactional nature of stance in general, which has been recognized by many researchers (e.g. Kärkkäinen, 2003; Mortensen, 2010; Myers, 2010). By taking a certain stance the speaker either opens up a dialogue space, allowing for different interpretations of the proposition that is presented, or closes it down, implying that there cannot be any alternative interpretations.

The meaning of ES adopted in the present research is broader than that of hedges and boosters. However, the functions of hedges and similar concepts identified in previous studies give us valuable insights into the array of communicative functions that ES expressions perform at the textual level and show the complexity of the studied phenomenon.

One important distinction that many researchers make when analysing the communicative functions of hedges and similar phenomena, is the division between the epistemic and the interpersonal use of hedges (Mauranen, 1997) or, in an alternative terminology, between the communicative textual and communicative interpersonal functions of hedges (Varttala, 2001). The first category is used as a means of positioning oneself with regard to the knowledge presented, while the second one is a means of positioning oneself with regard to other voices in order to be polite and modest, in accordance with the conventions of academic writing. Though this distinction does exist in academic texts, very often it poses a problem for researchers when deciding which of the functions the author meant in each particular case. Silver, for example, indicates that a 'less-than-complete commitment' to the proposition could mean either that "the writer is pointing to a tentativeness of the truth value, thus limiting his commitment temporally, or it could equally mean that his commitment is on the order of possibility and not necessity" (Silver, 2003: 372). Similar conclusions are drawn by Vold, who views the distinction between 'real' and 'conventional' hedges as purely theoretical "since we as readers do not have direct access to the reasons behind the writer's linguistic choices", adding that even the writer "may not be conscious of these reasons either" (Vold, 2006a: 239). These ideas are supported by Lewin's study of the perception of hedges by authors and readers that showed a significant

divergence in authors' and readers' identification and interpretation of hedges in texts (Lewin, 2005). In my work, though I recognize the division between epistemic and interpersonal usage of stance markers, I treat all the cases where the meaning can be classified as epistemic, as ES markers, though some of them may also have additional interactional meanings.

3. RESEARCH ON EPISTEMIC STANCE IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC ELF

Starting from Mauranen's seminal work on academic ELF (2012), the number of studies devoted to different aspects of academic ELF usage increases every year. Whilst ELF research initially focused on the form of linguistic expression, particularly with regard to academic ELF, recent studies are more concerned with the functions that these forms perform and the processes that take place in ELF communication (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2015).

Despite the ever-growing number of written academic texts produced internationally by L2 speakers of English, the written mode of academic ELF has only recently attracted attention (Horner, 2018; Lorés-Sanz, 2016; Mauranen, 2013; Mur Dueñas, 2016). However, research into the written mode of academic ELF seems very promising because, as Mauranen predicts, "academic writing is very likely to undergo comparable [to academic English speech] changes in the foreseeable future" (Mauranen, 2015: 48).

The studies conducted on written academic ELF data show that some variability in language use typical to ELF communication is accepted in published papers (Martinez, 2018; Rozycki & Johnson, 2013; Tribble, 2017). We might also hypothesize that with the increasing number of academic texts written by L2 speakers of English, the norms of academic writing will be gradually changing under the influence of L2 speakers, both in terms of the acceptability of linguistic forms and the rhetorical choices that L2 speakers make in their texts. This idea is also supported in the exploratory study by Martinez (2018).

From the academic ELF perspective, ES expressions have been studied in oral communication (Metsä-Ketelä, 2006, 2012; Mortensen, 2010, 2012), but, to my knowledge, there are very few studies devoted to ES expressions in written academic ELF. Among them is the study of Mur Dueñas (2016), which provides a comparative analysis of hedging modal verbs in RAs in the field of Business Management written by L2 speakers of English from different L1 backgrounds and native English speakers. Using the SciELF corpus, the study by Shchemeleva (2017) analyzes ELF-specific non-conventional forms of ES expressions and shows that L2 authors creatively exploit linguistic resources to express ES, demonstrating considerable variability in language use. It shows that the majority of non-conventional forms found in the data are approximate variants of conventional expressions whose meaning is easily recognizable:

(1) *The so far research* (…) *has shown that* the writer's communicative purpose may be… (SSH16)

(2) *It is admittedly plausible to argue* that the Court's perception of Islam is oversimplified and far from neutral; for example… (SSH26)

(3) *According to my view*, the shift signified the moral cultivation of actor's character. (SSH27)

In contrast to Mur Dueñas's research, Shchemeleva (2017), firstly, is not restricted to one discipline and, secondly, it does not compare texts written by native and L2 speakers; rather it aims to find out how L2 writers, irrespective of their L1, construct their texts in English. The present study adopts the same approach and looks into the ways L2 speakers use clusters of ES expressions in RAs.

4. DATA DESCRIPTION

The data for the study are taken from the SciELF corpus (SciELF, 2015), which is part of the WrELFA corpus (http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/wrelfa.html), the first corpus of written ELF texts. All papers included in the SciELF corpus are original research texts written by L2 speakers of English that have not been proofread or edited by any language professionals or/and native speakers of English. The majority of papers are pre-publication drafts that the authors submitted either for publication or for language revision. The major distinctive feature of the SciELF corpus compared to other L2 corpora is that it is not a learners' corpus, but a corpus of L2 use in international written academic communication. Thus, it uniquely allows us to study the texts in the form they are produced by international scholars who use English as a means to create and transfer academic knowledge.

One of the principles that guided the compilation of SciELF corpus was a consideration of the L1 of the first author of the paper – the corpus contains 10 L1s. Another important consideration was the disciplinary field: the corpus follows a broad division into Science (Sci) and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). Such a composition ensures that the corpus is representative both in terms of the L1 of the authors and disciplinary variations; hence it allows researchers to study what academic writing in ELF is really like.

Since the literature on academic discourse shows that the expression of stance varies according to discipline, especially between the so-called hard and soft sciences (Hyland, 1998, 2005; Hyland & Jiang 2016, 2018; Silver, 2003; Varttala, 2001), I concentrate on the latter and study the ways in which authors express epistemic stance in a broad academic domain of SSH. For the present

research a sub-corpus of twenty RAs from SSH was compiled. Because the aim of the study is to identify communicative functions of clusters of ES expressions employed by L2 writers in general, without looking into any particular L1 or discipline, the sub-corpus was intended to be as varied as possible in terms of L1 and sub-disciplines within SSH. It includes papers from ten different L1 belonging to eighteen different disciplinary fields within SSH (see Appendix) with the total number of words – 113,624.

5. METHODS

At the initial stage of the research the data was manually analyzed by two annotators with the aim of marking all linguistic means of expressing ES which were identified based on the classification of ES meanings developed by Biber et al. (1999). In the analysis, the annotators relied on the lists of ES markers described in grammars of English (Huddleston, Pullum, & Bauer, 2002; Quirk, 1985) and in previous studies (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 1998; Varttala, 2001, etc.). However, the analysis was not restricted to those lists because ES is an open category to which new linguistic expressions can easily be added, especially in academic ELF communication. The main objective was to include into the analysis all ES markers that actually occur in RAs in SSH written by L2 speakers from different similects,[3] so all the expressions conveying ES meanings found in the corpus, even those that are non-conventional from the point of view of Standard English, were included in the analysis.[4]

At the next stage of analysis, I identified clusters of ES markers (three or more ES expressions used within a paragraph). After that, the communicative functions of each cluster were determined based on the context in which the cluster was used.

To analyze where exactly in the texts the authors used clusters to express ES, I looked at the distribution of clusters in different sections of an RA. It should be noted that not all papers in the data had the standard IMRAD structure (Swales, 1990). In three papers the division into sections was content- rather than function-based. In those papers I formally identified the section based on its content: if, for example, the authors wrote about other research on the topic, I treated that part as 'Literature review', if they described the methodology, then it was considered the 'Methods' section. There was no problem in identifying the 'Conclusion' section (only fifteen papers had it) since in every paper the authors did present their conclusions: the section normally started with the phrase *In conclusion, ….*

[3] These are L1-based lects of English that are in contact with each other. In popular terms, "they are known as Swinglish, Finglish or Dunglish for Swedish, Finnish, or Duch-influenced English" (Mauranen, 2012: 29).

[4] For the analysis of conventional and non-conventional ES expressions used in SSH corpus see Shchemeleva (2017).

The most problematic division was between the 'Results' and 'Discussion' sections, as only seven RAs made a distinction between these two sections. Moreover, the majority of authors preferred to present and discuss the results simultaneously. That is why I decided to treat these two sections as one – 'Results and Discussion' – differentiating, where possible, the functions to present the results and to discuss the results.

On the whole, I distinguished five sections: Introduction, Literature review, Methods, Results and discussion, Conclusion.

6. THE DISTRIBUTION OF CLUSTERS OF EPISTEMIC STANCE EXPRESSIONS IN THE CORPUS

In the sub-corpus that I have made for this analysis, clusters were found in 19 out of 20 papers. In one sociology paper no clusters were identified; the only ES markers used in the text were several epistemic adverbs (*mainly*, *practically*, *basically*). In general, the authors of this RA use many passive constructions thus making the text very impersonal and objective; the information is presented more like established facts rather than interpretations.

A total of 135 ES clusters were found in the remaining 19 papers. Their distribution is very uneven. However, the papers from the sub-corpus seem to form two distinct groups: those that have fewer than 5 clusters – ten papers – and those that have more than 7 clusters – nine papers (see Table 1).

	1–4 CLUSTERS PER PAPER (NO. OF PAPERS)	7–19 CLUSTERS PER PAPER (NO. OF PAPERS)
Social Sciences	7	1
Humanities	2	5
Behavioural Sciences	1	3
Total number of papers	10	9

Table 1. Distribution of clusters (number per paper)

No correlation was found between the L1 of the author and the number of clusters in the paper. The type of paper (argumentative / empirical) does not seem to be an influential factor either, as far as the number of clusters is concerned: there are 4 argumentative papers, two of which belong to the first group and two – to the second group. However, there seems to be a correlation between the broad disciplinary field and the number of clusters: the majority of papers in the first group are from Social Sciences (7 papers), while in the second group there are 5 papers belonging to Humanities. It suggests that in my sub-corpus there is a tendency for authors of Humanities and Behavioural Sciences papers to use more clusters compared to Social Sciences authors.

SECTION	NO. OF PAPERS	% OF PAPERS	NO. OF CASES	% OF CASES
Introduction	6	30%	7	5.2%
Literature Review	6	30%	13	9.7%
Methods	2	10%	2	1.4%
Results and Discussions	*17*	*85%*	*98*	*72.6%*
Conclusion	10	50%	15	11.1%
Total			135	100%

Table 2. Distribution of clusters in different sections

The distribution of clusters in different sections of RAs (Table 2) shows that they are unevenly spread throughout the papers. There is a clear tendency to use clusters in the Results and Discussion sections: more than 70% of all clusters are found there.

7. FUNCTIONS OF CLUSTERS OF EPISTEMIC STANCE MARKERS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF RAs

The analysis of functions presented below is based on the number of clusters in RA sections: I start with the Results and discussion section, where the vast majority of clusters are used, then analyze the Conclusion section, the Literature review, and finally, those sections where the clusters are least frequently used (Introduction and Methods).

7.1. The use of clusters to present and discuss results

The analysis of the Results and discussion section suggests that the clusters are used to present and discuss the results of research for at least two major purposes.

The first one is to present results in a less assertive manner, thus opening up a dialogue space and leaving open the possibility for other interpretations. This function is realized by speculating about results and findings [4], and giving possible interpretations of the results [5]. In total, about 70% of all cases of clusters used in Results and discussion are used in this way.

> (4) *It is hard to believe* that these numbers *could indicate* actual purchasing behaviour, when such products are rarely available in Russia and additionally poorly recognised in Finland. However, our results *can be interpreted to indicate* that special value is given to organic products, and purchasing them is perceived as a desired action. (SSH21)

> (5) In some letter adverbs formed with the most frequent, regular suffixes *tend to* appear at the end, after some – *so to say* – less regular or less frequent adverbial formations. Also, the positions of some adverbs … is revealing as well, because they immediately precede a series of 'regular' adverbs. This *seems to imply* that *at least* one of Romanus' main sources was organised according to specimina. (SSH65)

The second communicative function of ES clusters found in the Results and discussion section is to mildly criticize and/or question the claims of other scholars while simultaneously stressing the authors' own claims. This is achieved when the proposition conveying ideas that contradict the authors' views are epistemically marked. For example, in [6] the most important idea – the author's claim – is introduced by the contrastive *nevertheless* and is not epistemically marked, while the previous sentence which offers an alternative interpretation is hedged.

> (6) *Basically*, they *mostly* function as Transition, i.e. from the functional point of view they *largely* occupy positions of lower communicative importance than the elements implying the meaning of explosion. This *may lead to suggestion* that the meaning of movement asserts itself as a dominant, communicatively important phenomenon within the analysed text; nevertheless, it is also surpassed by a successful competitor, i.e. the meaning of explosiveness. Thus it serves as an accompanying semantic phenomenon to the meaning focus of the whole narrative. (SSH16)

Another example of this kind is [7] where the author with the help of ES expressions tentatively criticizes the arguments of another scholar (Merello) and then explicitly makes it clear that his/her position is absolutely different:

> (7) So far I have pointed out the problems that the metalinguistic interpretation *seems to* rise. ... As I have said, *I think* that Merello is right in taking saepenumero as 'used' instead of as 'mentioned'. However, this solution leaves notet without a direct object, so that Merello *is forced to argue* that the previous examples must be understood as the direct objects of notet. *In fact*, she *suggests* that the remark on *multi tefacit* comes from Statilius as well. *In this particular point I will take a very different view*. (SSH65)

In cases similar to [6-7] clusters of ES expressions perform a clearly argumentative strategy: by dialogically presenting two contrasting ideas – the views of other researchers and the authors' own views – the author makes a clear-cut division between them, stressing their own arguments and closing down any space for dialogue. And although the percentage of such cases is not very high (they account for about 20% of all cases in the Results and discussion section), their role in developing the author's arguments is quite prominent.

7.2. Clusters in the Conclusion section

As predicted, the analysis has shown that in the majority of cases the clusters found in the Conclusion section are used to present conclusions in a less assertive manner, signaling that the conclusions may be interpreted as not final. Paragraph [8] presents a very interesting case because the cluster used there is the only cluster in the whole paper: throughout the text there are practically no ES expressions, while the conclusion is very heavily epistemically marked. This example reveals a certain strategy, when the author makes the whole text very neutral in terms of their epistemic positioning, but in the conclusion opens up some space for dialogue, especially when describing future research perspectives:

> (8) Although these arguments about the changing nature of criticism need further empirical investigation, *I would suggest* that an emerging research agenda about criticism and new media – that is, about criticism in contemporary popular culture - *might be* fruitfully informed by a field perspective. … *Indeed, it is very likely* that new media have altered the ways in which established experts conceive and practice their work (as showed by Hanraham's interviews). … *In this respect*, one *possibility* for future research *might be* the investigation of the struggles of different generations of critics ... The genealogical perspective of field theory, then, *may be* helpful in order to reconsider some of the changes which have been ascribed to the rise of digital technologies. For example, while forms of interaction between experts and audiences are *undoubtedly* facilitated by the Internet, they were made possible, *to some extent*, also by older technologies (as showed by the discussion about Italian music magazines). *In this respect*, field theory *may be* extremely useful to deconstruct the rhetoric of technological change. In contrast, one *might* focus on … Depending on the field, then, we *might find* a variety of… (SSH40)

Of course, we can only guess the intentions that the author had when they presented the Conclusion section in a non-assertive manner, but it seems doubtful that the author expresses real uncertainty in the conclusions they reached, because in other sections of the text ES markers are not used in this function. One possible reason why the Conclusion section is written in such a speculative manner might be that the norms of the genre require leaving some room for alternative interpretations of the results and conclusions and avoiding categorical assertions.

The analysis of clusters in the Conclusion section has shown that the majority of clusters found here are used to speculate about the results and present conclusions in a less assertive manner and hence to allow some other alternative readings. A typical example is [9]:

> (9) It was possible to understand some elements of the Greenpeace's discourse in this study. The reader *seems* to be portrayed as someone who is meant to follow orders or commands. *As we could see, almost all* the processes happen in the imperative mode. *The majority* of these functions is related to the realisation of green and protest actions, which are *rather* aligned with Greenpeace's view. The

> only counter example is the request for donations, for which this *rather* directive portrait *seems* unfit. In the Brazilian culture, asking for donations *is much like* a submissive act; therefore such act has to be modalised, since the writer is left in a very uncomfortable and inferior position. Other important matter is the kind of process present in these functions: *mostly* material. That *possibly means* that the addressee and possible activist-to-be is someone meant to realise only such actions. (SSH46)

However, there were also clusters (3 out of 15) that are used to express modesty and hence to diminish the authors' contribution to the field or the value of their research:

> (10) We should be aware that this is *most likely* a specific phenomenon for narrative texts. ... Moreover, the meaning focus is *possibly* desired or ideal process when creating a piece of literature ... *Hopefully*, this paper contributes to the recent studies on the meaning focus and its aesthetic result and *possibly* it further opens the door to new possibilities that the theory of functional sentence perspective has to offer in the language observations. (SSH16)

Aside from those cases whose function can be quite clearly determined, there are some clusters that can be characterized as individual stylistic preferences of the author. One such example is given below [11]:

> (11) *If it may seem obvious* that this type of representation occurs in texts like this, it is also important to notice that there are few studies that map the grammatical structures used for this purpose. *The same is true* with relation to grammatical studies in genres like these bulletins: *it seems obvious to think* that texts like this *would* work with demands for contact and funding beyond extolling certain behaviours or criticising the decisions of certain political groups. However, it is important to realise that the understanding of these structures *seems* to lead to better comprehension of the process of the construction of such texts. (SSH46)

Here we see a clear authorial position: though the results seem evident, they are very important (the author seemingly polemicizes with certain opponents for whom the results may seem obvious): in the concessive context the author shows the importance of the research though still in a speculative manner ("seem").

All the identified functions of clusters of ES markers in the Conclusion section are not mutually exclusive; they meet the established genre requirements of being not categorical in claims, modest, and in a constant dialogue with the professional community.

7.3. Clusters in other parts of the RAs

In the Literature review section (the third largest group, consisting of 13 cases) the main rhetorical functions of clusters are to speculate about the ideas of other researchers (8 clusters, 62%) and/or to present the ideas of others as possible (3 clusters, 23%). Both functions allow the authors to detach themselves from the discussed claims and ideas and to open up a space for alternative claims and ideas:

> (12) There *seems* to be *some evidence* that language teachers *do not always* teach in line with their stated beliefs, personal theories or pedagogical principles (Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Richards et al., 2001). (SHH06)

The other clusters found in the section are used to present a hypothesis (1 cluster) and to give a possible explanation of a past event (1 cluster).

Although the number of clusters in the Introduction section is not high – 7 cases – they seem to perform a distinct function: the majority of them (5 clusters, 71%) are used to present a hypothesis:

> (13) In this paper, we *hypothesise* that analogical reasoning, and more particularly the process of mapping, *would be problematic* in children with SLI. … Moreover, children with SLI *would have* more difficulties to detect relational similarities in verbal sequences (which involve linguistic processing) *rather than* in non-verbal sequences (which involve visual processing). If children with SLI have difficulties to find the similar relational structure between two situations and to use it with others elements, *it could explain* the lack of syntactic creativity and *it could thus explain* the lack of generalisation of construction schemas and a greater linguistic input dependency. (SHH 32)

It should be noted though that in this part of the section the clusters are used in only 6 papers (30%). This means that in the majority of texts in the data the authors do not use clusters in the Introduction.

In the Method section only 2 clusters were found, but in neither case were they used to describe methods: one cluster is used when the author identifies a gap in the research on the topic; the other one is used to describe the limitations of the research. In general, clusters are not used in this section in the corpus.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of clusters of ES expressions allowed us, without focusing on single ES markers, to identify those parts in RAs where combinations of epistemic expressions are found. These sections of the texts may be considered the most important in terms of expressing the authors' epistemic positioning.

This study has shown that clusters of ES markers are very unevenly distributed in the texts. However, it is possible to identify some regularity in their usage: the vast majority of clusters (more than 70%) are used in the Results and discussion section, mostly in parts related to the discussion of the findings. What is interesting here is the fact that the same trend has been observed in studies on the use of ES expressions (hedges and boosters) in published RAs in English (Salager-Meyer, 1994; Varttala, 2001; Vold, 2006a).[5] This suggests that L2 speakers who write their texts in English with the aim of publishing them in international journals, express their ES first and foremost in accordance with the norms of the genre.

Another factor that influences the use of ES expressions is the discipline. As Hyland puts it, "[authors'] discoursal decisions are influenced by, and embedded in, the epistemological and interactional conventions of their discipline" (1998: 349). The analysis of RAs written by L2 speakers who are professionals in their fields confirms that they construct their texts according to disciplinary conventions: the fact that the analysis has not found any correlation between the L1 of the author and the number of clusters in the text, but has identified some interrelation between the broad disciplinary field and the number of clusters, may indicate that L2 speakers are absolutely aware of the disciplinary conventions of writing and that their writing, at least in respect of ES expression, seems to be more influenced by the norms of the genre and the discipline than by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

As far as communicative functions are concerned, the analysis of ES clusters has revealed that the overwhelming majority of clusters are used by authors to present their findings, to discuss results and to speculate about conclusions (more than 80% of all clusters). We can only guess at the real motive of the author when they use clusters of ES markers: to demonstrate uncertainty or to show politeness and a humble attitude, but we can definitely conclude that it is common for L2 speakers not to be assertive when presenting arguments: in the majority of cases ES clusters are used to present new knowledge (ideas, claims, findings) as 'possibilities' rather than 'assertions' thus opening up a dialogue space and allowing for alternative interpretations. Of course, these results might have been expected given that it is a feature of the RA genre not to be very assertive in claims. However, the consistency with which the authors who have practically nothing in common except the common language – academic ELF – do it in their texts is striking: they use clusters of ES expressions in the same parts of texts (Results and

[5] It should be noted that in these studies RAs having the IMRD structure have been analyzed, so the section Discussion combines both Results and discussion and Conclusions; and the Introduction section combines both Introduction and Literature review. In this paper I distinguish Introduction, Literature review, Methods, Results and discussion, and Conclusion sections.

discussion) and practically with the same function (to detach themselves from the claims and open up a dialogue space).

In the analysis some other functions of ES clusters have been identified: they are used to express detachment from the claims of others, especially when these claims contradict the authors' own ideas; to cautiously criticize other researchers, and to present hypotheses. Although these functions are not as frequent as the one described above, they also play an important role in developing the author's arguments and in creating polyphony of academic texts. Here, it must be noted that the functions performed by clusters of ES expressions in the texts are not different from the functions described in previous research on academic texts in English. This might be considered as further proof of the fact that L2 speakers, irrespective of their L1, create their texts in accordance with the genre and disciplinary conventions: they do the same things as everyone else in their field.

A general conclusion that can be drawn about the way L2 speakers who are not learners but professional users of English express their epistemic positioning in texts written in English is that their ES is expressed in accordance with the accepted norms of the genre and the discipline. Compared to the results of previous research on published academic texts, we can say that the texts from the SciELF corpus are not much different either in terms of the distribution of ES expressions in different sections of RAs or in the communicative functions that these clusters have at the textual level (see e.g. Hyland, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Vold, 2006a, 2006b).

These conclusions, of course, are very tentative. In further studies it might be interesting to compare the use of ES markers in SSH and Sci to see if the distribution of ES markers and their communicative functions are the same in the Sci part of the SciELF corpus. It is also tempting to analyze to what extent (if any) the use of ES expressions is influenced by L1 of the authors and to describe individual authorial style in the use of ES. These studies would give us deeper insights into the ways multilingual L2 writers construct their texts in English.

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Appendix

Corpus characteristics

BROAD DISCIPLINARY FIELD	DISCIPLINE	L1 OF THE AUTHOR	NUMBER OF CLUSTERS
Social sciences	Economics	Czech	1
	Economics	Romanian	1
	Food economics	Finnish	4
	Political history	Swedish	4
	Political economy	Finnish	3
	Social policy	Italian	1
	Sociology	Russian	0
	Social anthropology	Russian	10
	Science didactics	Spanish	2
Humanities	History	Italian	7
	Philology	Czech	19
	Classical philology	Spanish	18
	Cultural anthropology	Finnish	3
	Corpus linguistics	Portuguese	14
	Linguistics	French	2
	Literary studies	Swedish	12
Behavioral sciences	Educational sciences	Chinese	7
	Educational sciences	Chinese	9
	Cognitive psychology	French	16
	Psychology	Portuguese	2